

Willard became the nation's most prominent orator, but far from the best paid. Her trips were organized in the cheapest way possible, including overnight rides, slow freights, and even trips in the caboose, one of which took five and a half hours to cover thirty-six miles. She was troubled by ill health, and when she collapsed in February 1898, she went into a rapid decline, during which she was politician enough to call in a sympathetic reporter for a final interview. Thirty thousand people walked past her bier in one day. Crowds stood for hours to see her coffin. In 1905, Illinois chose her to represent the state in Statuary Hall in the nation's Capitol, calling her "the first woman of the nineteenth century, the most beloved character of her time."

"BEAUTIFUL WHITE GIRLS SOLD INTO RUIN"

The Purity Campaign was the third great strand in the women's reform movement, and, like temperance, its bottom line was forcing men to behave. The WCTU started a campaign to get men to wear white ribbons, showing they had taken a pledge to be sexually pure until marriage and faithful to their wives afterward. Some of the organization's other efforts were more dictatorial, from censoring movies to covering up paintings of naked women. "Nude art never helped a soul to belief in the Lord Jesus Christ," opined the WCTU newspaper in support of a protest against the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Frances Willard supported the WCTU's censorship impulses, but her own priority was more serious—raising the age of sexual consent for girls, which was as low as ten years old in a number of states and seven in Delaware. By 1920, the WCTU had generally succeeded in making it illegal to seduce a girl under eighteen, although it took enormous effort to keep legislators in some states from bolting and bringing the age back down again.

The Purity Campaign, like temperance, was based on the idea that middle-class women were morally superior and therefore had the right to tell everyone else what to do. But also like temperance, it targeted a real social problem that brought its worst evils home to torture

innocent housewives. Venereal disease had always been a secret fear of American women. When *Ladies' Home Journal* warned girls that holding a boy's hand could be the first step on a path to "crippling illness and disease," readers understood what that meant. Doctors conspired with their male patients to keep wives from knowing that they had been infected, and in 1904, Dr. Prince Morrow, a New York physician, stunned his audience by estimating "that there is more venereal infection among virtuous wives than among professional prostitutes." (Other physicians felt that was a wild exaggeration, although they agreed the situation was serious.) Morrow claimed that 60 percent of American men had contacted syphilis or gonorrhea, generally from prostitutes, leaving their wives in danger of disease, sterility, and insanity. The American Social Hygiene Association, which he founded, advocated blood tests before marriage for men and sex education for women to warn them what to watch out for.

For the first time, people began considering sex education in the schools. But the classes offered were generally extremely vague—or so chilling in their depiction of the dangers of promiscuity that impressionable girls came out of them wondering if sex was really worthwhile. One psychologist studied the reaction of teenage girls to a class about venereal disease and discovered eleven of the twenty-five students "developed a pronounced repulsion for men." A women's college graduate claimed that "lectures . . . showing lantern slides of the ravages of disease" turned several of her classmates against men and marriage forever. One friend, she said, broke an engagement with "a fine young chap" after he confessed that once, while in college, he had "gone to a party with the boys."

The most common reaction from middle-class women was not a desire for education; when *Ladies' Home Journal* ran a series of articles on venereal disease in 1906, 75,000 readers canceled their subscriptions. And they certainly did not approve of trying to keep venereal disease in check by treating prostitution as a public health issue. In 1870, St. Louis legalized brothels and required licensed prostitutes to pass weekly health inspections, only to have the program killed by opposition from

clergymen and female reformers. Even Elizabeth Cady Stanton hated the idea. Their goal was not to have men sleep with prostitutes safely, but to have them stop using women as sex objects altogether.

Ending prostitution had always been a primary goal of women's reform movements. The Sexual Purity Campaign created a panic over the issue of "white slavery," producing books and tracts that described swarms of innocent girls lured away from their small-town homes by pimps and kept prisoner in brothels by brutal gangsters. The idea fit into white women's gut conviction that none of their sex (or at least none of their sex and race) would fall into prostitution voluntarily. One reformer noted wryly that the old middle-class vision of the prostitute as a "ruined and abandoned thing . . . too vile for any contact with the virtuous and respectable" had been replaced by a fantasy of the prostitute as "a shanghaied innocent kept under lock and key."

The white slavery hysteria also played on people's sense that the younger generation of women was spinning out of control, dancing the shimmy and going out to dinner with boys they weren't planning to marry. The same women who lived in terror of their sons taking to drink began to worry about their daughters falling into sexual slavery. Books and movies picked up on the theme, some clearly more interested in titillating their readers than mobilizing them into action. "Beautiful White Girls Sold into Ruin . . . Illustrated with a large number of startling pictures," one promised.

"CAN THEY NOT USE SELF-CONTROL?"

Sexual Purity crusaders blamed the falling birthrate on the plague of venereal disease, in part because they didn't want to acknowledge that nice women were using birth control. As with alcohol, disapproval of contraception quickly translated into a drive for a national ban. In 1873, Congress passed a law prohibiting the dissemination through the mail of birth control literature, drugs, or devices. It was the work of Anthony Comstock, an antipornography crusader who had accumulated enormous influence while heading the New York Committee for

the Suppression of Vice. Comstock, who lost his only daughter as a baby and later adopted a child, may have resented women who limited the size of their families when he and his wife had difficulty conceiving. Or perhaps the fact that Comstock arranged for the adoption without telling his wife suggests that he simply disliked the idea of female control. He supported only "natural" contraception, which meant total or periodic abstinence. Once, when a journalist asked if it was all right for a woman to use other means if a pregnancy would endanger her life, he replied: "Can they not use self-control? Or must they sink to the level of the beasts?"

Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice, which managed to acquire legal enforcement powers for itself, arrested 105 men and women for birth-control-related offenses. Posing as an impoverished father, Comstock approached the famous abortionist Madame Restell and asked her for birth control devices. When she complied, he had her arrested, and Restell, then a sixty-seven-year-old millionaire, put on a diamond-snudded nightgown and cut her throat in the bathroom of her Fifth Avenue mansion. "A bloody ending to a bloody life," Comstock wrote. Another of his targets, Ida Craddock, was a spiritualist who had published a guide to marital sex for women. When she was imprisoned for violating the Comstock law, she, too, committed suicide. When Comstock brought Sarah Chase, a homeopathic physician, before a grand jury for the sale of birth control devices, the all-male jurors declined to charge her, and one demanded to know if Comstock intended to drive Chase to suicide, too. Outraged, Comstock snuck into the grand jury room and persuaded the foreman to sign two bills of indictment he had prepared on his own.

Artificial birth control was not at that point an issue for which women reformers had much sympathy. Women's rights advocates argued for "voluntary motherhood," by which they meant the right to say no to marital sex. The idea that women would want to indulge in intercourse while avoiding pregnancy was strange to many people who still believed that women were too pure to be interested in sex. But the Comstock Act did not necessarily have much effect on private

behavior—the size of families continued going down. The fertility rate for white native-born women dropped from 278 live births per 1,000 in 1800 to 124 in 1900.

"WHAT EVERY GIRL SHOULD KNOW"

Margaret Louise Higgins was the middle child in a family of eleven, the daughter of Irish immigrants in Corning, New York. Her father was a stonemason, better at giving speeches about his radical political theories than keeping a job. Her older sisters helped earn money to send Margaret, the family scholar, to a boarding school. She trained to be a nurse, and in 1902 she married Bill Sanger, a young architect. They plunged into Manhattan's exciting left-wing political community and became regulars at the salon of Mabel Dodge, a wealthy collector of intellectual and artistic celebrities. Even in a permissive circle of friends in a permissive city, Margaret Sanger was apparently well ahead of most women when it came to sexual sophistication. Mabel Dodge called her "the first person I ever knew who was openly an ardent propagandist for the joys of the flesh."

From early on, the Sanger marriage was troubled. While Margaret was giving birth to three children, Bill Sanger switched to an unprofitable career as an artist, and she resented his failure as a breadwinner. To bring in some money, she went to work for Lillian Wald's visiting nurses on the Lower East Side. She quickly became familiar with women who were ruining their health with too many pregnancies, just as her own mother had done. For the rest of her life, she would tell the possibly apocryphal story of Sadie Sachs, a poor woman with a small apartment and several small children. Sanger treated her for complications from a self-induced abortion. When Sadie pleaded with a doctor for reliable contraception, Sanger would say, the doctor laughed and advised her to "tell Jake to sleep on the roof." Three months later she came back to find the woman dying from septicemia from another abortion.

Sanger was asked to write a column on sex education, "What Every Girl Should Know," for *The Call*, a daily newspaper with

socialist sympathies. When she tackled the subject of venereal disease, her column was banned by Anthony Comstock, who had acquired censorship as well as prosecutorial powers. The paper ran an empty space with the title: "What Every Girl Should Know. Nothing; by order of the U.S. Post Office." Out of the turmoil of her complicated private and professional lives, Sanger developed a mission—to bring family planning information to American women. Many of her male friends in the labor movement or politics found the crusade either strange or irritating. One night, Sanger and Bill Haywood, the famous labor leader, addressed a group of women strikers. An observer remembered that Sanger spoke of women's right to limit the size of their families and "received a hearty response" from the audience. Haywood then followed, promising the women that in the glorious economy built by union labor in the future, they would be able to have "all the babies they pleased." He was greeted by dead silence.

The birth control devices available to women in the first half of the twentieth century weren't much different from those on sale in the nineteenth, but the information was going to be better. Sanger was the first to evaluate all the available forms of birth control and produce clear explanations of what each one did, and how to use it. Eventually, she fled to Europe to avoid criminal obscenity charges for her work. While she was gone, Bill Sanger was arrested for distributing her pamphlet *Family Limitation*. "If some persons would go around and urge Christian women to bear children instead of wasting their time on woman suffrage, this city and society would be better off," the judge told him.

When Margaret returned to the United States, her husband was in jail and newspaper coverage of his case brought the controversy over contraception into public view for the first time—even though the *New York Times* discreetly refused to tell its readers the exact topic of the pamphlet Sanger was charged with distributing. Two months later the Sangers' little girl Peggy died suddenly, an event that haunted the guilt-ridden Margaret so much that she could never bear to remain in the presence of another mother and daughter. But to the public, the tragedy made both the Sangers martyrs for their cause and Anthony

Comstock their persecutor. In the end, Bill Sanger got thirty days in prison, and Comstock got a chill attending the trial, which led to a fatal case of pneumonia.

Despite their political victory, the Sangers' marriage was over but a new phase of Margaret's public career was about to begin. In 1916, she rented a storefront in Brooklyn and on October 16, she wrote: "I opened the doors of the first birth control clinic in America. . . . Halfway to the corner they were standing in line, at least one hundred and fifty, some shawled, some hatless, their red hands clasping the cold, chapped smaller ones of their children." Margaret and her sister Ethel, a nurse, charged 10 cents for consultations. In the few weeks the clinic was able to operate, the staff saw 464 women. But Margaret and her sister were arrested for selling a sex education pamphlet to an undercover policewoman and carted off to jail. As the police wagon drove them away, some of their clients loyally followed behind, walking down the street with their children in hand.

The Twenties: All the Liberty You Can Use in the Backseat of a Packard

"FLAPPERS ARE BRAVE AND GAY AND BEAUTIFUL"

Margaret Mead arrived at DePauw University in Indiana in 1919, expecting to "take part in an intellectual feast." But instead, Mead found the other coeds wearing muskrat coats and sorority pins. They were the first members of their family to go to college, and they were determined to enjoy the experience. "It was a college to which students had come for fraternity life, for football games and for establishing the kind of rapport with other people that would make them . . . good members of the garden club," sniffed Mead. A spiritual daughter of the Jane Addams era, Mead had stumbled into the advance guard of the flapper decade.

American women were transformed after World War I. They seemed to embody the changes going on in the country itself. The United States went from a young industrial state that was accumulating the capital to build factories and railroads to a world power with a consumer economy that relied on its citizens to keep the boom going by borrowing money and buying homes and cars. Meanwhile, the celibate settlement house worker was replaced as a female prototype by the jazz-crazed flapper dancing the Charleston in a speakeasy. Everything that had anything to do with consumption was in style. That

